

Gabriel Kaptchuk — Diversity Statement

I am a white, cis-gendered man who is an American citizen. I grew up in an upper middle-class family with a parent who is an academic. As such, my commitment to diversity takes the form of being an active and effective ally. I have been working on becoming an ally through self-education, building a network of friends to hold me accountable, and actively supporting members of my communities.

I first connected with social justice organizations while living in Baltimore through close friends in the Ultimate Frisbee community. While this might seem like a strange way to access social justice spaces, there is a significant part of the Ultimate Frisbee community that is deeply invested in navigating gender equity in a sport most often played with many genders of people on the field. I have since endeavored to strengthen my equity analysis lens, both within the sport and beyond. While the focus within Ultimate has been gender equity, I have also attended many trainings focused on dismantling white supremacy.

Mentorship. Although I have not formally started advising PhD students, I have been informally mentoring several students. Among the five students that I have informally mentored thus far, one is a man. My approach to advising is holistic—borrowing the extraordinary models of support from which I benefited during my PhD. I believe that it is my responsibility to advocate for and support students both in their academic pursuits and in their lives more generally. This is particularly true for students who, because of their identities, are more likely to be overlooked or discounted.

Teaching. Teaching digital privacy and computer security inherently touches on marginalization. Surveillance is deployed as a tool of oppressive systems and is often weaponized against communities of color and those without access to financial resources. Moreover, there is a long history of surveillance being used within the logic of settler colonialism as a tool of social control. Rather than leave these notions as subtext, I actively engage students about the ethics of mass-data collection, and concretely root the material in the social effects of surveillance. Students find this approach to be engaging; I had many students email me and come to office hours in an effort to deepen their understanding of the social ramifications of surveillance. I expanded this part of my course into a seminar in Spring 2022 called Confronting Surveillance, which featured speakers who are experts on the effects of surveillance on communities. I hope to compile the readings and lessons from this seminar into a full course in the future.

Computer Science continues to be a field in which it is difficult for women, gender-queer people, and people of color to thrive. Within my courses, I strive to create a space in which this is not the case. Several of the concrete logistical ways in which I do this is by following best practices for soliciting student's pronouns and actively soliciting feedback about classroom dynamics. I also try to stay very aware of who is taking up space in my classroom; when students—most often, but not exclusively, white men—are speaking a lot, I consciously ask other students to join the conversation. I have also found it is valuable to note in class when students repeat their peers, as it illustrates to the original speaker that I valued their comment.

Research. My research focuses on how cryptographic tools can deliver privacy-preserving applications to communities. Because marginalized communities are more often the target of surveillance, my work naturally considers these communities and attempts to build tools for social good. Several of my ongoing research projects focus explicitly on new applications of cryptographic for marginalized communities. For instance, I have been working with a start-up founder on developing cryptographic systems for sex workers in the United Kingdom.

Service. I started the Johns Hopkins Computer Science department's PhD student orientation, which had never previously existed and has continued after my graduation. This orientation was designed to set the cultural tone in the department, foster connections between the research groups, and investigate the personal aspects of pursuing a PhD. Because many of the students were new to Baltimore, part of the orientation was a guide to Baltimore and its history. An important part of this history is understanding the way racist systems have shaped the landscape of Baltimore, and the active role that Johns Hopkins University had in upholding those systems. Organizing this event made me a de-facto resource for PhD students throughout the department, which gave me the opportunity to help my peers navigate difficult situations, both professional and personal, in the department.